

## Situation Rooms: Performing City Resilience in New Orleans

Stuart Andrews and Patrick Duggan

City Hall, New Orleans, 2 April 2018

We are standing on the top floor of City Hall in New Orleans, surrounded by a series of meeting room style tables. Individual working areas are demarcated by chairs, each one with a telephone and laptop in front of it. Small printed cards on stands designate the function of the table. These designations are echoed on large, triangular signs that hang from the ceiling so as to be visible from almost any corner of the space: OPS Table 1, Situation/Documentation, Logistics, Planning, Purchasing/Finance. At several of these stations, a high-vis jacket of orange or yellow hangs over an empty chair signifying the position that the 'Table Lead' will occupy. At one, a dark blue cardigan hangs incongruously where we would expect high-vis.

The room has windows on two sides. The view from one window, by 'OPS Table 2', where we find ourselves, is obscured by a storm force blind that can withstand the impact of a hurricane at least as strong as Katrina. From the window next to it, we can look out to the North East of the city – across the French Quarter, the Seventh Ward and the Marigny. The room behind us is eerily quiet yet busy with the flickering of multiple television screens showing rolling news. This large, multi-sectioned room of prime real-estate lies dormant but clearly ready to perform its function as one of the city's three situation rooms.

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**Stuart Andrews** is Senior Lecturer in Theatre and Performance at the University of Surrey (UK). His research addresses practices of performing place, particularly in terms of architecture and environment. **Patrick Duggan** is Senior Lecturer in Theatre and Performance and Director of the Centre for Performance and Urban Living, at the University of Surrey (UK). His research explores the relationship between performance and the wider socio-cultural and political contexts in which it is made, asking: what is performance for, what does it do culturally, politically, socially, aesthetically? Andrews and Duggan jointly run Performing City Resilience (<https://performingcityresilience.wordpress.com>), an internationally-focused research project that brings together knowledge and practice in arts and resilience in case study cities.



Fig. 1: 'Situation Room', looking northeast from City Hall, April 2<sup>nd</sup> 2018.  
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We are being shown this room by Ryan Mast, Hazard Mitigation Administrator and, at the time, Acting Chief Resilience Officer for New Orleans. He describes the room's function as a place from which the city is managed in different contexts, both those of crisis and those of significant 'pressure' on the city. In this room, performances of crises are played out in three ways: 'table-top' exercises in which key players in crisis management talk through various scenarios; live simulations of real crises that play out across the city with volunteers, emergency services and city crisis managers role playing; live events, both planned city scale events like Mardi Gras or the Super Bowl, and emergencies, such as mass evacuations due to storm warnings or live shooting attacks. Through different simulations the room *rehearses* the city. In the instance of a live crisis, the room also *performs* in the city: intelligence received here is processed, analysed and acted upon, and this affects the actions of individuals and teams across the city. We confess to Ryan about being rather surprised at how often the situation room are used, particularly for sporting events. While we are there, the city is preparing for *WrestleMania*.

In this room, confronted by the everyday and the extraordinary ways it is put to work through performance, we become aware of the multiple places (and spaces) in the city that we might consider to be fulfilling similarly strategic functions. Although perhaps not framed in these terms, this is a city where there is a plurality of places that function *as* 'situation rooms'; places where people and information about the city are brought together to generate, share, analyse and challenge intelligences *about* the city. That is, there are places that think-through (rehearse) and materialise (perform) the city politically, socially and culturally. These spaces afford 'on the ground' perspectives on the city and the resilience challenges it faces. To holistically understand how a city is and can be resilient, we need to take seriously the places in which people come together to generate new understandings and formulations of that city. That is, the places – the 'situation rooms' – in which city resilience is *performed*.

In this article we look at how three situation rooms in New Orleans might be seen to be 'performing resilience' through practices and processes of: everyday and aesthetic performance, architecture, and community. In each instance the 'situation rooms' enable critical stakeholders to draw on existing and emerging knowledges and intelligences, so that they might understand and respond to specific, present and/or future 'situations'. As we intimate above, City Hall explicitly uses performance as a mechanism through which the city and city officials can come to know the city and how it functions at times of crisis and or pressure. For us, the second space, the Music Box Village, can be seen to examine and renegotiate relationships to water and to the edgelands of the city. Lastly, we turn to the Southern Rep Theatre's newly completed 'home', a performance venue that in its development seeks to renegotiate social and racial relations in an area of the city, trying bring people into it by leveraging an understanding of the city against the design of the building so as to open the building to the city. Each of the situation rooms *rehearse* the city in different ways: they practice the city, get to know it and to know how to be in it; they are also *performing* the city, opening up new understandings of place, inviting people to be in the city differently. Each is about resilience insofar as it is about honing the complex functioning of social, civic, and cultural systems in the city.

### **'Rethinking' Resilience**

Definitions of resilience abound but most tend towards some variation of Judith Rodin's proposition that it is the ability to 'develop greater capacity to bounce back from a crisis, learn from it, and achieve revitalization'.<sup>1</sup> Common also is some iteration of Brian Walker's sense that resilience 'is the capacity of a system to

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<sup>1</sup> Judith Rodin, 2015. *The Resilience Dividend: Managing Disruption, Avoiding Disaster, and Growing Stronger in an Unpredictable World* (London: Profile Books), p.4.

absorb disturbance and still retain its basic function and structure'.<sup>2</sup> These definitions share a predominant focus on hard infrastructure and/or systems that support it, with only occasional (and often passing) attention to human factors being considered. This is, of course, to be expected: in the face of an unfolding crisis the capacity to get the water and electricity running again, for example, is of fundamental importance to human survival. Yet, to ignore, or at least to implicitly devalue human factors is to miss the importance of social interactions as a capacity building activity. This gap in thinking has not gone entirely unnoticed, however. Siambabala Bernard Manyena has proposed that if resilience is to be properly understood socially, politically, and in terms of infrastructure, we 'need to address the philosophical questions that continue to blur the concept'.<sup>3</sup> Beyond the philosophical, in this article we argue that the arts, and performance in particular, are fundamental to the development of more nuanced understandings of resilience.

This article takes as its central premise the supposition that locally situated arts practices might be useful to understandings and practices of city resilience in a given geopolitical context. While, in line with Jen Harvie's arguments in *Theatre & the City*, we recognise that in any given city artists are engaged in demonstrating, producing, critiquing and influencing urban life, there is currently no work that relates this work on urban life to considerations of urban policy in terms of resilience.<sup>4</sup> In response to this, we look to engage with what we might think of as local resilience challenges (to borrow the language of 100 Resilient Cities<sup>5</sup>) and locally situated arts practices in order to 'speak back' to resilience thinking and practice more broadly. Our hope is that from the specificity of our case study on New Orleans more general, globally applicable understandings will emerge. The paper arises from a wider research project, *Performing City Resilience (PCR)* and field research we conducted as part of that project in New Orleans in March and April 2018.<sup>6</sup> Drawing on this field work, we are asking: how, and to what end, might we understand resilience through the ways in which a city identifies,

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<sup>2</sup> Cited in Rodin, p. 43.

<sup>3</sup> Siambabala Bernard Manyena, 2006. 'The concept of resilience revisited'. *Disasters*, 30:4, 433 – 450; p.434.

<sup>4</sup> Jen Harvie, 2009. *Theatre & the City* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan), pp. 7 – 8.

<sup>5</sup> 100RC was established as a network of 100 cities to facilitate the global sharing of knowledge on issues faced by multiple cities. As part of its engagement with cities, 100RC funded a Chief Resilience Officer (CRO) in each city for one year, during which time the Officer would write a resilience strategy document for that city and, in so doing, identify the specific resilience challenges faced by that city. 100RC invited cities to reflect on these challenges holistically, across governmental organisations, and to enable discussion between CROs in cities that faced similar issues. See: <https://www.100resilientcities.org>.

<sup>6</sup> See: [performingcityresilience.wordpress.com](http://performingcityresilience.wordpress.com). The project hopes to reach as diverse an audience as possible, within and beyond academia. To that end, we published an early, much shorter version of this essay for a general readership on 100RC's news blog. See: <https://www.100resilientcities.org/performing-city-resilience-case-study-new-orleans/>

investigates and deals with its resilience challenges in, with and through performance (as practice and analytical framework). To do this, we look at the bi-fold operation of performance in the city: how performance venues might recalibrate understandings of the city, and how performance can illuminate the operation of situation rooms in the city. That is, we will analyse two recently constructed performance spaces as ‘situation rooms’ and explore how performance can be used to understand the operations of the situation room in City Hall. Through this we seek to elucidate the importance of performance to understandings of city resilience in practical and theoretical terms.



Fig. 2: Swings overlooking the Mississippi, Crescent Park, New Orleans, March 30<sup>th</sup> 2018. © Stuart Andrews and Patrick Duggan

There is significant and growing interest in resilience planning in the face of challenges that pose a threat to people and/or place. In his editorial to the first issue of the *Resilience* journal, David Chandler observes that:

Resilience is now a central concept informing policy frameworks dealing with political, developmental, social, economic and environmental problems in ways that clearly transcend traditional disciplinary boundaries.<sup>7</sup>

Interest in resilience is particularly evident in urban contexts, both as it is understood and practised in individual cities and by organisations that connect to and collaborate with specific cities. In part this may be a result of increasing urbanisation, with more than half the world’s population living in cities. For example, in

<sup>7</sup> David Chandler, 2013, ‘Editorial’. *Resilience* 1:1, 1 - 2: p.1.

2013, the Rockefeller Foundation set up 100 Resilient Cities (100RC). As its name suggests, 100RC has worked with 100 cities, to support work within these 100 cities.

100RC identifies resilience in terms of ‘challenges’ that it classifies as either ‘acute shocks’ or ‘chronic stresses’. For 100RC:

Shocks are typically considered single event disasters, such as fires, earthquakes, and floods. Stresses are factors that pressure a city on a daily or reoccurring basis, such as chronic food and water shortages, an overtaxed transportation system, endemic violence or high unemployment.<sup>8</sup>

On one level, urban resilience is an issue of infrastructure, but this infrastructure is necessarily engaged in supporting and enabling practices of life and work in a city. For us, there is a need also to try to understand the ways in which people *live* in the context of resilience challenges and the ways in which they make sense of this experience of living in a place facing shocks and/or stresses.

Alongside this growth in strategic resilience planning, particularly in urban contexts, theorists have sought to define resilience as a means of conceiving of and practising place. In 2006, Walker and Salt suggest that resilience is ‘a way of looking at the world’ and ‘seeing systems, linkages, thresholds, and cycles in the things that are important to us and in the things that drive them’.<sup>9</sup> For Walker and Salt, where once the challenges of a city might have been seen and attended to as discrete concerns, resilience takes them together as interconnected and in need of critical analysis and unified response. Similarly, David Chandler argues that:

[R]esilience – and its ubiquitous rise across the policy spectrum – is an invitation to critically engage with the world around us, to ask new questions of it and to overcome disciplinary and conceptual divides based upon the understandings of the past.<sup>10</sup>

Thought through in such terms, resilience shares much with by now well-worn understandings of performance as a means through which people understand, practice, and, crucially, materialise the world around them.<sup>11</sup> That is, we might argue, that performance and (understandings of) urban space can be co-constitutive: each enacts something on the other that materially impacts upon its ‘creation’

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<sup>8</sup> 100 Resilient Cities, *n.d.*. ‘Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) About 100 Resilient Cities’, available at <<http://www.100resilientcities.org/faq/>> [accessed 21-9-18].

<sup>9</sup> Brian Walker and David Salt, 2006, *Resilience Thinking: Sustaining Ecosystems and People in a Changing World* (Washington: Island Press), p. 114.

<sup>10</sup> Chandler, p.1.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example: Nield, S., 2015. ‘Tahrir Square ECAM: The Occupy Movement and the Dramaturgy of Public Order.’ *The Grammar of Politics and Performance*, ed. S. M. Rai and J. Reinelt. London: Routledge, 121-133. Nield, S., 2006. ‘There Is Another World: Space, Theatre and Global Anti-Capitalism.’ *Contemporary Theatre Review* 16.1: 51-61.

and its subsequent functioning.<sup>12</sup> While there is currently significant global debate on urban resilience – to understand and respond to challenges in specific cities – there is no work that thinks through the contribution the arts and arts strategies make to resilience thinking internationally, and vice versa. Equally, while artists in a city may well be acutely engaged in articulating and reflecting on the resilience challenges of that city, they may not specifically identify that work as a practice of resilience. That is: the arts are missing from resilience thinking. This article seeks to contribute to filling that gap by arguing that performance can be key to understanding city resilience, and resilience might offer much to understanding the ‘work’ performance, and performance spaces, do in a city.

### Performing City Resilience

As arts academics we are concerned to understand, elucidate and share emerging understandings of how the arts can be a meaningful part of contemporary discussions on resilience and associated analysis of what Chandler calls ‘the world around us’. To greater or lesser degrees, much, perhaps all, arts practice asks questions, or at least invites us to look again at the world in which we live. Faced with pressing resilience challenges, few policy-makers turn to artists for solutions. In the reverse, artists may not be entirely comfortable understanding their work solely – even partly – in terms of resilience. The more art is perceived to have a particular use, the less it is free to critically engage with conditions in the world around us: in such a context there is a tendency to instrumentalize the arts rather than think about the socio-political work it might already be doing in a city. That is, we need to think less about how the arts might be used as a communication tool, for example, and more about how they are useful to revealing and articulating new and existing understandings of a city. There is, we sense, a need for conversation, for brokering, for thinking with stakeholders across borders of discipline and role. This might then begin to understand the ways in which the arts rethink the world and how this might directly reimagine resilience challenges which, in Chandler’s terms, may comprise ‘political, developmental, social, economic and environmental problems’.

By taking this perspective, we can look again at existing performances, as well as acts in a city, to begin to understand their contribution to a city and to its performance of resilience. To give an indicative sense of what we might mean by *performing* city resilience, we would like here to offer two examples from the UK. The first might be thought of as having provided a means for rethinking the development of a city’s future through performance, the second as having offered an

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<sup>12</sup> We note here Amanda Rogers’ use of the term co-constitutive as a valuable term to reflect on the interrelation of performance and cities (Amanda Rogers, 2012. ‘Geographies of the Performing Arts: Landscapes, Places and Cities’, *Geography Compass*, 6:2, 60 – 75).

opportunity for a city community to cohere around a performance following catastrophic violence.

In 2013-14, the academic and artist Stephen Hodge created *Where to build the walls that protect us* to explicitly question the impact of environmental shocks and stresses on Exeter (UK). The work presented participants with an ‘opportunity... to imagine and model a future city’ by walking in the city with Hodge, as well as gathering some time later to reflect on that process and model in clay versions of a future city that understands its resilience challenges.<sup>13</sup> And while Hodge did not frame it in these terms, certainly that is what the performance was capable of doing as a locally situated performance concerned with the challenge of ecological change.<sup>14</sup>



Fig. 3: View of New Orleans CBD from Crescent Park, March 30<sup>th</sup> 2018.

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While Hodge’s site-specific, participatory project attended to a chronic stress (frequent city flooding), Tony Walsh’s live, and then remediated, performance of his poem ‘This is the Place’ sought to address the acute shock of the Manchester

<sup>13</sup> Kaleider, Nov 2013 – Sept 2014. ‘Where to build the walls that protect us’, <<http://kaleider.com/projects/where-to-build-the-walls-that-protect-us/>>, [accessed 10/07/2017].

<sup>14</sup> Personal telephone correspondence with Duggan, 30 June 2017.



bombing on 22 May 2017. Written in 2013 for local charity Forever Manchester, the poem was intended both to build support for that charity, and as means to articulate the achievements and plural activities of Manchester historically and in the contemporary moment. It was, then, always already about building resilience: of the charity, of the city and its communities. But in its re-articulation after the bombing, the poem became a rallying cry to unify people in the face of terrorism and, as the writer Jeanette Winterson put it, a means of helping to 'face up to the tragedy... giving us back the words we need' when '[we] don't know what to say'. The 'poem becomes part of what has happened, as well as a way of talking about it'.<sup>15</sup> In its performance at the vigil in Manchester on 23 May 2017, the poem became a performance of city resilience.<sup>16</sup>

Where the above examples are *performances* of resilience, in New Orleans we became fascinated by places (of performance) that operate in the city to renegotiate understandings of the city and its resilience challenges. In the following we examine three 'situation rooms' to understand how they build and understand resilience in terms of their operations as sites of intelligence gathering, as places that bring people together, and as spaces in which the complexities of a city can be rehearsed and/or performed in different ways.<sup>17</sup>

### Situation Rooms

The term 'Situation Room' emerged in response to what Michael K. Bohn identifies as the 'Bay of Pigs disaster', the failed attempt by the US to invade Cuba in 1961. Visually, perhaps the idea of a situation room is most familiar to us in the contemporary moment through the photographic image *Situation Room* (taken by Pete Souza, 2011), of Obama's administration during Operation Neptune Spear,

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<sup>15</sup> Jeanette Winterson, *Guardian Online*, 20 May 2017. 'With his Manchester poem, Tony Walsh found words where there are no words', <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/may/25/tony-walsh-poem-vigil-manchester-bombing>> [accessed 10/07/2017].

<sup>16</sup> A video of the performance of the poem at the Manchester vigil is available at <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PszMmYpQjPo>> [accessed 21/09/2018].

<sup>17</sup> We were outsiders in New Orleans, Duggan had visited the city twice previously, for Andrews this was a first visit. Our time in the city was relatively short, a ten day visit, in which we conducted multiple interviews (with artists, journalists, venue managers and funders within the city) and site visits (to theatres, public art and recreational spaces and key areas of the city associated with resilience challenges). We're aware that insider/outsider perspectives come with positive and negative connotations. For us, in general terms, we felt ourselves welcomed for bringing fresh insights to the city. In not being obviously allied with local, regional or even national institutions or agendas, we seemed able to discuss the city in relation to the arts and resilience challenges in open, possibly even naïve ways that facilitated expanded critical conversations about those topics. We were not seeking to fix resilience practice, or, thereby, the city, but rather to discover and draw attention to new critical 'resources' that performance can offer in that context.

which led to the assassination of Osama bin Laden. Bohn writes that either McGeorge Bundy (Special Assistant to the President for National Security) or Walt W. Rostow (Deputy Special Assistant to the President for National Security) reflected that “we could have avoided [the Bay of Pigs] fiasco if only we had a crisis centre in the White House.”<sup>18</sup> That is, a situation room provides an opportunity for key stakeholders to gather, receive critical and up to date information, analyse it and make swift decisions that impact upon the operation of people on the ground during whichever ‘situation’ is being played out. As noted in the Obama White House archives, the “Sit Room” serves as a conference facility, a processing center for secure communications, a hub of intelligence gathering, and a center for emergency operations.<sup>19</sup> Key here, we think, is the idea of intelligence gathering and communication as a mechanism through which crises can be analysed and responded to as a considered, if responsive, and strategic practice.

Situation rooms have become a familiar trope in some contemporary performance practices. For example, in 2016, Split Britches presented *The Situation Room*, a ‘performance-conversation [...] with elder audience participants’.<sup>20</sup> Staged in the immediate aftermath of the Brexit referendum (UK) and the 2016 US elections, the piece deployed a scenography recognisable as that of a ‘situation room’, from news media and popular culture. This included well-lit tables arranged in a circular formation, a red telephone, headsets and information screens above that displayed maps of the world, and particular geo-political contexts. In the same year, Fuel presented *The Situation Room: Prejudice & Perception*, a series of events intended to ‘better understand the fractures in our society... a place for audiences, artists and researchers to talk about the big issue, to meet other minds and to be entertained’.<sup>21</sup> In 2015, Micol Hebron turned her double garage into *The Situation Room*, a gallery in Los Angeles. For Hebron, ‘the name is general enough to cover any potential situation – nuclear war, terrorist attacks, military coups, spy business, or, who knows, maybe sexual transgressions happen there, too.’<sup>22</sup> In

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<sup>18</sup> Michael K. Bohn, 2003. *Nerve Center: Inside the White House Situation Room*. (Dulles, Potomac Books), p. 22.

<sup>19</sup> Obama White House Archives, 2009. ‘Inside the Situation Room’, <<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2009/12/18/inside-situation-room>>, 18-12-09 [accessed 11 September 2018].

<sup>20</sup> Split Britches, 2018. ‘Situation Room’, available at: <[Split-britches.com/situation-room/](http://split-britches.com/situation-room/)> [accessed 17 September 2018].

<sup>21</sup> Fuel Theatre, n.d. ‘The Situation Room: Prejudice and Perception’, available at, <<https://fueltheatre.com/projects/the-situation-room-prejudice-and-perception>> [accessed 11 September 2018].

<sup>22</sup> Cited by Patrick Quinn, 2017. ‘Los Angeles has its own Situation Room’, *Art and Cake: A Contemporary Art Magazine with a Focus on the Los Angeles Art Scene*, 21 February, available at <<https://artandcakela.com/2017/02/21/los-angeles-has-its-own-situation-room/>> [accessed 17 September 2018].

each instance, the situation room is considered as an element of the diegesis, a setting in which the action takes place.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, echoing Lyn Gardner's critique of the work by Fuel, such performances are not properly engaging with the complexities and possibilities of rethinking situation rooms and the usefulness of contemporary performance to understanding local, regional or national 'situations'.<sup>24</sup> In this article, we are interested in the ways in which we understand how three sites intervene in performances of resilience in the city. We are interested to articulate how a city Situation Room can be understood through performance, and as a site of performance, and how two different arts venues can be understood as doing the work of situation rooms in the city.

Here, we are concerned to move beyond conventional appropriations of the situation room as content/setting, to consider how performance spaces are doing the work of situation rooms in a city in relation to resilience challenges. As is perhaps now so well-rehearsed as to be commonplace, for Michel de Certeau a city operates as a signifying system within which, we argue, architecture operates performatively to constitute a 'place' based on how that architecture intervenes in and interacts with its multiple users and local geography.<sup>25</sup> This will of course ripple out across the city more broadly, especially where an architectural intervention or recalibration is deliberately attempting to (re)negotiate understandings of place and community by adding something new to an environment, be that people, practices, meeting spaces, and/or things to do, see, eat. In this way, as geographer Amanda Rogers may have it, 'Cities are a particular type of place where the performing arts are staged, but there are a variety of relationships between performance and urban space' which serve to ensure that 'urban space is continually re-created'.<sup>26</sup> This happens in a number of ways. For example, through participation in performance practices, from going to the theatre to see a play, to taking part in a protest, to cheering and catching 'throws' along a Mardis Gras parade route. It is also evidenced in the ways that arts organisations and performance venues *perform* in the city, such as in how they interact with the communities that they represent and present, and how their spaces might be seen to intervene in urban geographies.

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<sup>23</sup> See also *Situation Rooms* by Rimini Protokoll (2013 – 2019): <https://www.rimini-protokoll.de/website/en/project/situation-rooms>

<sup>24</sup> Lyn Gardner, 2016. 'Going off-script: theatre needs to break free of its echo chamber', available at <<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/theatreblog/2016/dec/09/theatre-echo-chamber-fuel-situation-room>> 9<sup>th</sup> December 2016 [accessed 21-9-18].

<sup>25</sup> See Michel de Certeau, 1984. *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. by Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press).

<sup>26</sup> Rogers, p. 68.

**City Hall**

Fig. 4: Situation Room, top floor, City Hall, New Orleans, April 2<sup>nd</sup> 2018.  
© Stuart Andrews and Patrick Duggan

New Orleans' City Hall sits at 1300 Perdido Street in the CBD, more or less on the edge of the French Quarter. We decided to walk there from a meeting we had in a different part of the city. The two-mile walk felt longer than it was because of the heat of the day. We arrive hot and anxious not to be late. The building is imposing and, well, ugly: an evidently municipal design, it is essentially an enormous cuboid of weather-worn grey-white block work and reflective glass. A large, faded red 'City Hall' adorns the top of the structure. We enter the building into a surprisingly small foyer that is reminiscent of the security area at a small airport: metal detectors, security guards and x-ray machines. As we are being ushered through the security protocols, a guard asks what room we are going to. We say we are meeting with Ryan Mast but the guard doesn't recognise the name. We don't know where we are going and so ensues an awkward (possibly peculiarly British) sort of choreography of apologies, fumbling for mobiles, frantic email searching and nervous laughter. The guard doesn't seem to mind: perhaps he is amused, perhaps he is used to it.

Once on the top floor of the building, we arrive at the determinedly locked door of the Office of Homeland Security and are buzzed in after giving our names. At the end of an hour-long interview with Mast, he asks if we'd like a tour to see where his work happens. We weren't expecting to see the situation room, indeed neither of us knew it was there.

In our conversation with Mast he noted that his work within the Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness, has 'historically... focused on the hard emergency management component of disaster recovery'.<sup>27</sup> In our discussions with him, Mast reflected on the need to protect cultural infrastructure and artefacts, as well as to understand the cultural underpinnings of the city's identity, especially in terms of music and 'everyday' performances such as Second Lines (dancing in the streets behind the 'main line' of a brass band).<sup>28</sup> Moving beyond these 'strategic' concerns, one of the things that became clear when Ryan showed us around a situation room was that this was a space that 'staged' its thinking. That is: in a space conventionally associated with responding to resilience challenges, rehearsal performances are played out both in round-table and live action simulations as means of planning and thinking-through for 'the real thing'. But also, in the event of a real crisis or large-scale city event like *WrestleMania* (that they were preparing for when we visited) this is a 'venue' in which *performances* of resilience practice happen. So in the same way that we are making the argument for arts being understood as a means through which a city thinks itself through, so too is performance a practice that the city deploys in its practices of disaster preparedness.

Mast walks us through the space, pointing out the various stations and functions of them. He talks about the strength of the storm blinds and that the space has its own, dedicated power generator. It is clear that this is a serious space, one in which important work is done by people who are highly skilled and proficient. An impression backed up by Mast's own relaxed performance in the space: he seems uncannily at ease here, practiced and precise. As we take in the contradiction between the banality of the space, a fairly generic office space on the surface of it, and the complexity of the work carried out here, Mast mentions that they carry out 'simulations'. They rehearse their work through live performances of crisis scenarios that are enacted across the city making use of volunteers to help emergency and other services 'play out' the event. They also do 'table-top' talk-throughs of situations with key members of the city who would be present in the situation room should a real event unfold. We ask him how the scenarios are put together; he tells us an external company writes them. We comment to Mast that

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<sup>27</sup> Interview with authors, 2 April 2018, City Hall, New Orleans.

<sup>28</sup> See: <https://www.neworleans.com/things-to-do/music/history-and-traditions/second-lines/>.

these are performances and that they make use of techniques and practices of the theatre. That is, this is a place that is operational only in and through performance.

As Bohn reflects of the White House situation room, staff in City Hall, New Orleans, use this room for a variety of situations. In some instances, only a few people will work here, in others, the room will be busier. Thus, the practice of the room varies in terms of the scale of the event and its implications, the breadth of intelligence gathered, and the types of decision-making and activities undertaken. A single situation room is, necessarily, flexible and open to varying levels of use. The actions within the situation room are connected to systems within and associated with practices of city governance. The scale of events is, therefore, filtered through standardised processes, however much these may be nuanced in particular cases. Nevertheless, in each instance of its use, this room operates to understand the city and make it resilient (in the sense that it prepares the city to attend to crises) in what we might call a *performance-like* mode. If, as Manyena observes, resilience thinking needs to account for more than just 'vulnerability reduction', then performance thinking might give us compelling ways of identifying an extended understanding of resilience practices.<sup>29</sup> The practices and techniques of theatre and performance underpin operational and skills development processes of the Situation Room: rehearsals, particular and designed scenographies, use of semiotic conventions, assigned roles that people perform (and perform well), codified practices of procedure and timing. Moreover, it is *performative*, insofar as decisions taken in this room directly impact upon operational performances on the ground and the (immediate) future of the urban environment.

This situation room, like all such civic situation rooms, we imagine, very clearly performs city resilience in relation to understanding a city and how it might prepare for and/or respond to a crisis. It is a venue that performs its thinking, sometimes publicly, sometimes in closed rehearsals, but in each case this is a space which performs resilience. That said, we find this room differs from those we turn to below but in ways that are productive to understanding how all of these sites are alive to their situation and their relation to the situations that are active around them.

### **The Music Box Village**

It is early on a Spring evening. Our taxi driver stops, with some uncertainty, just beyond the last of the houses on the street. Beyond these, the road appears to peter out. Either side, the ground is rough, there is some parking to the left, and, further on and to the right, a railroad crosses the road. Ahead of us, we see the grass bank of the industrial canal. We're a little tight for time and the driver's

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<sup>29</sup> Manyena, 2006: p. 446.

uncertainty makes us uneasy that we might have this all wrong, that we may have mixed up the location. That said, we're reassured by the presence of people moving this way. It's not exactly a crowd, but we join a stream of people, in pairs and small groups, heading towards the end of the road. We cross the ground to the left, passing in between and beneath the canopy of trees, to a building that lies well back from the road. There is a sense of disconnection between the order of the roads, of satellite navigation systems, and the building, which we remember as being only partly visible from the houses on the street. Stopping briefly at the box office, and a table where our tickets are checked, we work our way around the structure, through a wide entrance, into an enclosed, open-air interior.



Fig. 5: Interior and raised viewing platform in the Music Box Village, March 31<sup>st</sup> 2018.  
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The Music Box Village is a 'sonic garden', a 'sound art installation/performance venue', just off St Claude Avenue, which opened in 2016.<sup>30</sup> It was built and is managed by New Orleans Airlift, a non-profit arts organisation in the city, which was established following Hurricane Katrina. In contacting the organisation about our *Performing City Resilience* project, we were offered tickets to a show. We invite – albeit at their expense – two of Patrick's friends who live in the city and who have helped us orientate ourselves. On the evening we visit, we watch *From These Roots*, a performance by musicians and three dancers. The venue

<sup>30</sup> New Orleans Airlift, *n.d.* 'The Music Box Village' available at <<https://musicboxvillage.com>> [accessed 17-9-18].

comprises a central stage area used by the dancers and a series of buildings or booths on two levels. In building the venue, New Orleans Airlift invited local and international artists to construct these ‘percussive homes’, structures that can house performances but that might also be ‘played’ musically in some way. The structure has, in part at least, been constructed from reclaimed materials, which may be both practical and pointedly political. This is a case of needing to use that which remains in a city facing considerable resilience challenges, including pronounced poverty and legacy damage from Katrina. Although we are ‘inside’ the venue, its architecture is more like an enclosure, open to the elements with percussive ‘houses’ in and between the trees. We buy a drink and food at stalls just inside the venue and find a spot to watch the performance. Spectators gather around the stage, on fixed seating and stand at gaps between the ground floor structures and on a staircase and viewing platform. The use of the buildings as instruments appears distinctive.

Afterwards, the performers retire and spectators roam the site, many of the lights from the performance remain on, the space takes on an otherworldly, almost magical air. We walk out of the exit, which opens onto the car park, onto an evening that is not quite dark. We climb the bank of the canal, and become aware of the scale of the water, of pillars set into the deep water, and an industrial structure on the far side. Beyond us is the Lower Ninth Ward, one of the areas most devastated by Katrina. In the hurricane, the industrial canal was a critical site of flooding.<sup>31</sup> We descend the embankment, duck under a chain-link fence and begin walking along the train tracks. After a few minutes, we pass an abandoned military base: the F. Edward Hebert Defense Complex. The friends we’d invited explain this is inhabited by people who are homeless. We step off the railroad and become acutely aware of the lack of barriers between the people who live here, and the freight trains that pass through the area. As we pass this place, the darkness of evening has descended and so the absence of street lighting is palpable. Only the occasional external light on a house offers relief from the gloom.

For Delaney Martin, Co-founder and Artistic Director of New Orleans Airlift, Music Box Village offers a space for ‘deep and radical collaboration’ in a complex geo-political environment.<sup>32</sup> Located at what feels like a semi-forgotten edgeland of the city, with ships looming imposingly above the top-line of the tall corrugated iron walls the venue makes apparent the complex relation of the city to its industrial infrastructures and ecological challenges. The space reveals the enormity of the canal, its power and potential for devastation. And in its proximity to and juxtaposition with abandoned infrastructures now ‘home’ to the homeless the space articulates other challenges in the city to do with housing, economic and race inequities. Yet, at the same time, the venue *performs* resilience by gathering

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<sup>31</sup> See: [https://www.nola.com/opinions/index.ssf/2018/06/industrial\\_canal\\_damage.html](https://www.nola.com/opinions/index.ssf/2018/06/industrial_canal_damage.html)

<sup>32</sup> Interview with authors, 3 April 2018, The Music Box Village, New Orleans.



people together through performance to inhabit a disused industrial site, in order to experience, rethink and then, potentially, celebrate a previously ‘abandoned’ area.

As Martin explains, when we meet her at the Music Box village a few days later, the venue is the latest in a series of iterations in which participants have been concerned to maintain and make sense of arts practice in the city. Martin describes her sense of devastation that culture might not return to the city in the aftermath of Katrina. A friend had suggested bringing art from New Orleans to Berlin, a version of the Berlin Airlift with aeroplanes bringing arts practice, rather than food. This work led to a project not far from the current site, that involved building a percussive home. That home might be understood as a ‘situation room’ that emerged from the ‘situation’ of Katrina. This practice of transformation and reclamation became a model that the company used to develop the Music Box, a site that now helps understand and rearticulate the resilience challenges of the city.

### **The Southern Rep Theatre**



Fig. 6: The emerging entrance of the new Southern Rep Theatre, April 3<sup>rd</sup> 2018.  
© Stuart Andrews and Patrick Duggan

It's early April 2018, just before nine in the morning. We're standing on the sidewalk in front of St Rose de Lima Church on Bayou Road, just before it crosses North Broad Street. This location is at the intersection of three areas of the city, each distinct, historic and socially complex but interrelated: the Seventh Ward, Treme-Lafitte, and Fairgrounds. In front of the church, the sidewalk widens, the building itself is set back from the street. There is what appears to be an administrative building for Uber opposite, a house, perhaps two, a music store to the left of the church, and housing to the right. The red brick and stone church is a significant feature on the street. It is tall in comparison to the one or two storey structures close by. There is a tower, perhaps a later addition, to the front of the church. The building is surrounded by metal fencing, weighed down with sand bags. We're a little early and decide to walk the perimeter, discovering another church on the street behind, also in a state of renovation.

We are here to meet Aimée Hayes, Producing Artistic Director of the Southern Rep Theatre, which will take over the Church as its new permanent home in time for the autumn season. We had met with Hayes a few days previously, to discuss her work at Southern Rep in the context of city resilience, and she had invited us to visit the site.<sup>33</sup> Southern Rep identifies as the only year-round theatre company in New Orleans. It seeks to 'develop and produce new plays that reflect the diversity of the city we call home'.<sup>34</sup> In that context, the intention, Hayes tells us, and their website makes clear, is to use the new venue as 'a cultural anchor on the Bayou Road corridor'.<sup>35</sup> This is a compelling, if complicated goal given the complexity of the area the site occupies, especially as it is one that is fast gentrifying.<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, Hayes is acutely aware that a theatre venue offers significant possibilities as a place for people in a city to gather, be and think together. This situation room is intended to be far more than the site of theatre events, something she is explicitly attending to in her approach to the new space.

Hayes leads us in via a side door, taking us through the emerging areas of the building. We see renovations to the structure and additions, in particular the newly emerging walls of the auditorium. As we walk, elements of our previous conversation take more tangible form – we begin to see the lie of the land, both in and outside the church. In particular, we are caught by the relation between interior and exterior, between the theatre emerging in this church and its conversation with the streets and the city outside. Hayes had suggested that theatre is counter-

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<sup>33</sup> Interview with authors, 31 March 2018, Roosevelt Hotel, New Orleans.

<sup>34</sup> Southern Rep Theatre, *n.d.*. 'Southern Rep Theatre', available at <<http://www.southernrep.com>>, [accessed 19-9-18].

<sup>35</sup> Southern Rep Theatre, *n.d.*. 'New Home for Southern Rep', available at <<http://www.southernrep.com/plays/newhome/>> [accessed 21-9-18].

<sup>36</sup> The area is being developed in work that includes a new 'campus' of arts and education institutions. Meanwhile, there have been recent efforts to help local businesses survive and thrive in this context (see: <http://small.tulane.edu/project/bayou-road-initiative/>).

intuitive in New Orleans because everything is normally outside.<sup>37</sup> The intention, then, is to blur the sense of inside/outside. She explains that there will be no fence, no barrier between the street and the theatre. Instead, new glass doors will always be open - there will be no need to open a door to enter the space. Tables and chairs will spill from the café-bar foyer into the inviting courtyard that meets the street. Similarly, drawing on the particular context of the city, Hayes reflected that she would offer a form of 'lagniappe', a little something extra, before (or after) the ticketed shows: free performances of music, dance, theatre in the foyer of the building and on an outside stage adjoining the sidewalk.<sup>38</sup> Such practices are locally situated strategies to mitigate resilience challenges. These strategies insist that the venue is open to all the communities that border this intersection of neighbourhoods. As such, they facilitate a situation in which the established Rep audience, local residents and business owners, who may or may not be new to the theatre, are able to meet, happenstance, over a drink or free performance.

The new theatre is a significant development for Southern Rep Theatre.<sup>39</sup> From 2012, when a lease expired on a previous property, the Theatre had been without a permanent base. Hayes recounts a long-drawn out process of setting up shows in various venues in the city, often in places with limited facilities. Before each performance, she explains, she would address audiences in person, welcoming them to the show, thanking them for bearing with the, at times challenging, conditions. Despite the challenges of these venues, Hayes reflected on her efforts to enhance the value of the work of the Rep. She recalls setting up voter registration booths in a foyer. In establishing the new venue, Hayes is concerned to maintain her established conversation with her existing audience and with new audiences in their new home, both in the city and, particularly, in the local area.

This is not a venue, nor a company, that identifies itself in terms of city resilience, or indeed, in broader terms, of maintaining or enhancing the city. Yet, in its work in temporary venues, and in developing this new permanent venue, the Rep's work reveals its attention to and engagement with the city and its richness and diversity, but also the complexities of the communities local to the venue. This becomes important in the context of gentrification, a city-wide phenomenon particularly pronounced here. While the new theatre could appear to be part of processes of gentrification, Hayes is aware of this problematic and seeks to counter it by 'keeping the doors open'. As such, the building and subsequent practice of this space is the latest demonstration of Southern Rep's long and sustained performance of city resilience.

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<sup>37</sup> Interview, Hayes, 31-3-18.

<sup>38</sup> Interview, Hayes.

<sup>39</sup> The new Southern Rep building opened in autumn 2018. We write this a week or so before the first show in the venue, *A Doll's House, Part 2* (written by Lucas Hnath and directed by Hayes).

## Conclusion

In thinking through the complexities of how an entity can be resilient, Rodin suggests that it is ‘important that people engage in activities that celebrate their identity and also that bring the crisis into that identity rather than ignore or negate it’.<sup>40</sup> That sense of establishing, renewing and renegotiating identity is part of the operation of the arts venues explored here. In surveying these venues and the ways in which they create places for particular arts practice in New Orleans, we find that each one constitutes a place in New Orleans but also troubles understandings of place in the city. The Music Box is a fixed and secure structure, but also open to the elements. It is a ‘permanent’ venue, in a place that suffered significantly as a result of Katrina, in which the *impermanence* of structures, specifically homes, was acutely apparent. The building sits at the end of a street, just up from a line of houses yet just across the tracks from an abandoned military base, now home to those who find themselves homeless. Southern Rep seeks to destabilise the apparent neatness of interior and exterior, street and venue. The Situation Room is both a place to observe and manage events in the city but is also separate to the city, a place that is removed, perhaps necessarily so, in order for it to fulfil its function.

For Rodin, fundamental to good resilience practice and thinking is the idea that:

We should not want to make ourselves, our communities, businesses, and cities rigid and unchanging and forever fixed, but rather flexible, adaptable, and capable of absorbing disruptions and converting them into change that contributes to the system’s overall functioning and purpose.<sup>41</sup>

All of the places we discuss in this article are precisely contributing to such flexibility. Thus, to recognise a plurality of situation rooms in a city is to understand and allow that there are no singular views of a city: the city itself is different depending on the perspective one occupies in relation to it (at any given moment). While we have focused here on two performance venues as situation rooms, and identified performance as critical to the operation of civic situation rooms, we recognise that this term may be productively applied to other critical sites and centres within a city. As such, we recognise the significance of accounting for multiple situation rooms, of not focusing solely – for instance – on perspectives from the arts without taking into account those of resilience professionals, or vice versa. Each of our three case studies addresses highly localised conditions, grounded in the personal experiences of those who have brought the spaces into being and/or who operate (within) them. With Music Box and Southern Rep, this is a process

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<sup>40</sup> Rodin, 274.

<sup>41</sup> Rodin, 52.

that has taken many years of iterative development and engagement with the city and previous projects in different locations in the city.

In this article, and in the wider *Performing City Resilience* project, the attempt is to offer new understandings of resilience. In introducing a methodology by which arts and city stakeholders are considered, we seek to uncover the mechanisms by which resilience work can be practised by multiple stakeholders in a city. Thus, we understand the arts as fundamental modes by which cities understand, renegotiate and remake themselves. From addressing these three sites, we are acutely aware that while arts and city stakeholders are fundamentally engaged in thinking through the city by testing ideas and practices of life in the city, the arts are not necessarily seen as *making* the city. Nor is the potential for the arts to remake the city, to recreate the city in a single event or through multiple activities being recognised, theorised or contributing to resilience planning in the city. This is a missed opportunity in resilience planning, both in the particular context of New Orleans but also more broadly in cities elsewhere. The intention of our work is thus to highlight the potency of performance to resilience thinking. Additionally, we argue for a more nuanced look at what engagement with a city's resilience challenges might offer artists both as potential topics of focus and in terms of articulating the importance of their practice in relation to a city's pressing plural concerns. This approach offers significant potential to the future of the city by helping to recalibrate understandings of the usefulness of 'the arts' to resilience professionals, and of 'resilience' to arts thinking and practice. That is, we are modelling the arts, and performance in particular, as central to nuanced understandings of a city's identity and to thinking through a city's specific resilience challenges.

For Nicolas Whybrow, 'cities are *made* by human beings'<sup>42</sup> in interaction with objects, spaces, places and each other. Meanwhile, Amanda Rogers argues that, 'performance is integral to infrastructural geographies of the city... [and can] offer a way to conceptualise the city'<sup>43</sup>. As our study of these 'situation rooms' demonstrates, this conceptualisation is not just confined to interrogations that performances might make of a geopolitical context through aesthetic practices. It also includes the ways in which performance practices embed themselves in the *operation* of the city. This is evident in the deployment of performance techniques as central to the very running of the city in preparation for and in the midst of crises or city-scale public events. The centrality and usefulness of performance can also be illuminated through the ways in which particular venues might accidentally or deliberately call attention to environmental challenges by bringing people to a place in the city previously abandoned or maligned as an edgeland. Equally, by

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<sup>42</sup> Nicolas Whybrow, 2010. 'Introduction'. In Whybrow, N., ed., *Performance and the Contemporary City*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 12.

<sup>43</sup> Rogers, p. 68

approaching resilience challenges through performance, we can consider the ways in which architectural decisions are made in appropriating a building to speak to the communities that surround them, offering an invitation to use the building as gathering place, performance venue, impromptu workspace, or simply a place to people watch.



Fig. 7: Railroad at the Music Box Village, March 31<sup>st</sup> 2018.  
© Stuart Andrews and Patrick Duggan

In thinking about these sites in this way, our intention is to help articulate and make clear that performance, as a critical practice and mode of analysis, can help

cities realise what Rodin calls ‘the resilience dividend’, the capacity for a plural approach to resilience to bring ‘benefits that are sometimes beyond what you can imagine’.<sup>44</sup> This enables faster recovery from crises *and* brings economic and socio-political benefits ‘when things are going right as well as when they go wrong’.<sup>45</sup> This call for plural approaches to resilience suggests that the arts can be key to imagining the future of cities so that they operate with a resilience dividend. However, the arts have not yet been seriously considered in this context. In each of the case studies above, the ‘situation room’ operates as means through which New Orleans is understood, renegotiated and remade in some way. Each offers a vantage point from and on the city that enables individuals and communities, city stakeholders and private citizens to ask critical questions of the city, and about the shocks and stresses it faces. These particular sites use performance as a key mode of intelligence gathering, reflection and communication. This facilitates opportunities to develop and refine means of response to city challenges. In this sense, they are all situation rooms that *perform city resilience*.



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<sup>44</sup> Rodin, p. 9

<sup>45</sup> Rodin, p. 320.